

# Christopher Lloyd

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An early display from annuals and biennials in May and June adds great freshness to the garden scene. There are two principal ways of obtaining this: by late summer to early autumn sowing or by sowing in early spring.

The advantage of the first routine is that, if all goes to plan, you will get the strongest possible plants with great potential for flowering over an extended period, once it has started in late spring. By contrast, the same annual sown in spring will, with the lengthening days, be urged to start flowering before it has built up into a decent-sized plant.

The disadvantage of summer/autumn sowing is that you may easily get your timing wrong, and this is critical. If you sow too early (and this may not be your fault but simply because the season turns out to be exceptionally mild) the seedlings may well start flowering that same autumn and lose their stamina in doing so. If you sow too late (and where you live will influence this as much as the season), the seedlings will not have the chance to develop sufficiently in the same year to give themselves the extra strength and bulk that you are looking for.

Cornflowers are a good example. I grow Blue Diadem, a strain that makes a big enough plant (1m at least) to flower over a long period. I live in East Sussex, which is pretty mild. If I sowed in mid-September and the autumn remained open, the seedlings would be trying to flower the same year. Wash-out. But, in fact, we did not sow till 18 October. The seedlings are individually potted into 10cm squares, but have only about six leaves each. They should be larger by now. If really well grown, for display outside my porch, they can be finished off in 2-litre pots. Clearly, we should have sown two or three weeks earlier. They'll be all right, but not as splendid as I could wish.

If you fail with an autumn sowing, you always have the early spring option to fall back on. With the Angels Choir strain (from Thompson & Morgan) of annual poppies, for instance. Our autumn sowing was too late and the seedlings have not yet been pricked out, even, but if they fail, a March sowing will still give us decent results. (I might say, in parenthesis, that although members of the poppy tribe are reputed to have too delicate a root system to stand being handled at all, this is not true. Catch them young, treat them gently and they'll forgive you.)

Hardiness also needs to be considered. We give the winter protection of a cold frame to all the subjects I am discussing, but even so, some of them are inclined to damp off. We find that the sky-blue-flowered *Cynoglossum amabile* is one of these, so we generally sow that in March.

Love-in-a-Mist - both the blue *Nigella damascena* Miss Jekyll and the darker, richer *N. hispanica*. These are perfectly hardy and most gardeners simply allow them to self-sow. But, that way, the seedlings are invariably overcrowded, whatever your resolutions about thinning them, and we find that we get far more impressive results by sowing and potting off under glass, planting out in April or May at quite wide spacings. And we sow both in autumn and in early spring, as a matter of routine.

There is no overall rule for the Dianthus tribe. With annual carnations, an autumn sowing will give you rather earlier-flowering plants the next summer than a February sowing. As they start flowering late anyway, autumn has the edge and there'll be no problem from premature flowering. It is also worth bearing in mind that these carnations germinate at quite low temperatures. If you missed out in autumn, have a go early next month and don't step up the heat.

I dote on Dianthus Rainbow Loveliness, with its overpowering fragrance borne on the air. Spring sowings produce spindly plants. We sowed on 1 August and the plants, potted, are overwintering in a frame and are not too forward. We shall plant them out in spring and they'll be flowering by the end of May. After they've finished, we shall follow on with another bedder.

Dianthus F1 Princess Scarlet was sown 1 August and is flowering now, prematurely - not scarlet at all!

*Cerinth major Purpurascens* is immensely popular and you get by far the biggest plants from an autumn sowing. Ours was on 11 October and seedlings come on fast, so they are in 8cm pots now. They need stopping once and we'll plant out in April, allowing a 30cm spacing at the least. Actually, I'm not crazy on it, myself, but it does flower for a very long time.

One of our greatest favourites is *Campanula patula* (0.5m), which has showers of campanula-blue bells in great quantity and goes with anything. From a sowing on 23 July, the seedlings, first pricked out, were lined out and have made really plump plants, only a few flowering prematurely. We are threading them through our borders. If you visit late next May, you'll be sure to fall in love with them. But, as with many good things, they do demand a spot of preparatory work.

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